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Perpetrating Disaffection: Schooling as an International Problem

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'Schooling worldwide is characterised by misery, boredom, bullying, deceit, anxiety, humiliation, brutalisation, ethnic – and many other types of – discrimination, religious – and many other forms of – indoctrination, sexual – and many other kinds of – exploitation, and testing to destruction. It should not be like that. It should be fun.' (Douse,2005:1).

Introduction

Disaffection with school is global and can manifest itself in a number of ways – active and aggressive resistance within school, official exclusion resulting from resistance, passive resistance/non-cooperation, mental truancy, actual truancy, temporary or permanent drop out (especially in countries where formal education is not universal); school 'phobia' and the adoption of alternative modes of education such as home-based education. Yoneyama (2000) provides a useful analysis of four explanatory discourses that inform the debate on 'Tokokyohi' or school phobia in Japan. Three out

of four - the psychiatric discourse (mental illness), the behavioural discourse (pupil laziness) and the socio-medical discourse (pupil fatigue) - blame pupils and their parents for not fitting into school. School is the default position, a given good. An example of this approach was a report on school behaviour and disaffection by the English Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) in 2005 which found that found that schools faced particular problems with children aged four to six who are 'ill-prepared socially and emotionally' for school and that many disruptive pupils have special needs, poor language skills or come from disadvantaged or dysfunctional families (Slater 2005).

There is now such an emphasis on pupils and parents as the problem in certain countries that the state is increasingly using the police and judicial systems to enforce schooling. In England parents are sent to prison if a child plays truant, police patrols search for school refusers and head teachers propose to fine parents up to £100 for taking their children away on holiday in term time without permission. There are serious discussions about, and even trial runs of, the use of electronic tagging devices to cut down truancy in America, Japan and Britain (Lee 2005). In America there is a growing trend of criminalization of student misbehaviour. School discipline cases concerning matters such as violations of the school dress codes and being loud and disruptive in school are increasingly being sent to the courts and the juvenile justice system rather than being handled by the principal's office. One girl who refused to abide by the dress code was handcuffed by a city police officer and taken into a police car a to a detention centre. In Ohio, Virginia, Kentucky and Florida juvenile court judges are complaining that their courtrooms are at risk of being overwhelmed by student misconduct cases that should be handled in schools. One juvenile court judge

talked of the ‘demonising of children’ (Rimer 2004). A head teacher in South Carolina resigned amid public pressure after agreeing to a commando-style police raid in which officers stormed classes, guns drawn, handcuffing and pinning students to the floor in a futile drugs search (Phillips 2006).

However, Yoneyama’s fourth discourse, the citizens’ discourse regards school phobia and other forms of school refusal as the normal response of normal students – it is the schools that are sick, students are not sick. It is less a case of drop out than push out. This article is concerned with this fourth discourse – the role that school plays internationally in perpetrating disaffection with itself. The purpose of this article is to provide some examples of the ways in which schooling is an unattractive and hostile environment for learning that discourages both attendance and positive participation.

The Downside of Schooling

Much of the time an observer of global debates on education would be hard put to notice that there was a serious problem with schooling. Conferences and publications on education, whether of policy makers or academics, overwhelmingly stress issues of access to schooling and the potential benefits of formal education such as higher personal income, economic growth for the wider society, physical well being and good citizenship and ignore, or at least play down, its more negative aspects. Yet there is considerable evidence, for example, that schooling, rather than providing equality of opportunity and rewarding merit, actually reproduces existing inequalities in societies. This was argued in some detail by regard to America by Bowles and Gintis (1976) but two recent large scale studies carried out by Bristol University and

Kings College London produced very strong evidence of the continuing significance of social class background in influencing the educational chances of success of pupils in Britain. Children from middle class backgrounds have access to higher quality educational resources and better prospects of academic achievement than children from poorer backgrounds (Asthana and Hinscliff 2006; Taylor 2006). The British political elite also continues to be dominated by the products of private schools. Whereas 7% of the general population goes to private school, 76% of judges comes from private schools, 68% of barristers, 55% of solicitors, 32% of members of parliament, 42% of party leaders, 56% of life peers in the House of Lords, 56% of top newspaper journalists and 56% of top TV journalists (Garner and Russell 2006). In Africa political elites also utilise expensive private schools to help retain the privileged positions of their families (Boyle 1999).

Worse, however, than reproduction is that there is also widespread evidence that schooling can be directly harmful and actively makes society worse by perpetrating violence (Davies 2003; Harber 2004). This latter role of schooling, which has a significant impact on disaffection and the various forms of school refusal, forms the focus of the present discussion.

It is interesting that pupils have been involved in organised protests against schooling since medieval times. In 1911 up to a million school pupils in Britain went on strike. In other countries too – America, China and South Africa – there have been organised forms of resistance to schooling (Adams 1991). So, it is perhaps not surprising that, when asked, pupils have some significant criticisms to make of schooling. The

foreword to a study of the views of the views of 15,000 pupils on schooling in Britain made some very pertinent points in the light of the findings that followed,

'How can we turn schools into places where children happily go and are able to learn? And what is education *for* anyway?…"Respect" was the single word that occurred most; it was what the children wanted but felt they didn't get . They were forced to do work they weren't interested in, in buildings that were falling down around their ears. They were expected to fit into a structure and a curriculum that seemed to have been created without the first reference to what they might enjoy, or respond to. Most of all, they were sick of not being listened to' (Gardiner,2003:ix-x).

This in itself goes a long way to explaining pupil disaffection and a recent survey of teachers in England suggested they agreed with over half saying classroom behaviour and the problem of pupil disengagement would decrease without the prescriptive, rigid and restrictive national curriculum (Brettingham 2006). There have been similar findings from studies of pupil views on schooling from America (Cushman 2003), Ireland (Devine 2003) and Greece and Spain (UNESCO,2003:5). Even the school buildings themselves can contribute to disaffection. A recent online survey of over 1100 pupils between the ages of 10 and 18 in the UK found that 62% didn't like their school buildings with many claiming they wee old, dirty and boring. Many of the students felt that increasing safety concerns – especially the use of high fencing - meant that the school was starting to look like a prison and that their freedom was being curtailed. As the authors of the report stated, '…the debate on how we ensure our children's safety in school without locking them away in quasi prisons is long overdue' (Hill 2006).Given that many pupils are forced and cajoled into school in the

first place, the more interesting question is not why there is disaffection and resistance but why so many pupils remain polite and well mannered?

Fewer studies have been done on pupil's views in developing countries but some academic studies have noted the often rigid, boring, irrelevant and poor quality of the schooling on offer (Molteno et al 2000:2,71; Alexander 2000:9). One study of rural schools in South Africa did ask pupils about their schooling. It found that there were worse problems than boredom or irrelevance – not only was the teacher-centred still the norm but pupils registered their dislike of the use of continuing use of corporal punishment and the sexual harassment and abuse of female students (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005).

Finally, it has to noted that corruption can also play a part in excluding pupils from school. As a recent book on corruption in schools and universities put it, there is no lack of data illustrating the diverse forms that corruption can take in the education sector (Hallak and Poisson 2006). As the authors of this book also point out, educational corruption and malpractice undermines one of the main potentially positive purposes of education, the promotion of universal values including integrity, citizenship and ethics. A report by Save the Children in Mongolia, for example, noted that teachers had started hidden businesses forcing pupils to buy textbooks, handouts and charging illegal fees thus pricing out many from attending school. This is coupled with widespread physical and emotional violence against children by teachers in school, also a major disincentive to attend (Save the Children 2006).

Safe in School?

An enormous effort is made worldwide to get children into school. Two major international inter-governmental conferences have been held – one in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and one in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 – where solemn pledges have been made to achieve primary education for all children globally. In those countries which have already achieved this, a huge effort is expended to actually keep them there. However, reluctance to attend may in many cases have more to do with self-preservation. School are not necessarily safe places.

School buildings themselves can indeed be unsafe with dangers ranging from unhygienic toilets on the one hand to buildings in danger of falling down and failure to protect from earthquakes and fires on the other (Harber,2004:46). In July 2004, for example, a fire engulfed a primary school in Kumbhakonam in southern India, killing 78 children, some of whom had been left unsupervised. School buildings in the town do not require clearance from the fire department and even when the firs safety regulations are mandatory they are rarely observed. There are no trade standards for who can become an electrician and shoddy electrical equipment adds to the problem. All 23 of the school's teachers were reported as having run away from the school building as the fire spread, leaving the children behind. Some pupils who died were trapped because teachers and not unlocked an iron-grille door on the narrow staircase of the school building. Krishna Kumar of Delhi University's department of education said,

‘It’s chaotic. No norms and guidelines are followed anywhere in India when schools are established…A large number of schools, both private and government-run, are housed in very dangerous buildings, but issues such as fire safety are too sophisticated for government officials to enforce’ (Rahman 2004 a and b).

The failure of schools to protect children from bullying is another significant disincentive to attend. Bullying can take many forms – physical violence, threats, name-calling, sarcasm, spreading rumours, persistent teasing, exclusion from a group, tormenting, ridicule, humiliation and abusive comments. It has been known to be a serious problem in schools in many countries for many years but little seems to change (Roland and Munthe 1989; Oshako 1997; Ruiz 1998). One study of 13 year olds in 27 countries found that the majority had been engaged in bullying at least some of the time (WHO 2002:29-30). A survey of 2772 pupils in Britain in 2000 reported that more than half the respondents had experienced bullying but just under half said their school did not have an anti-bullying policy, despite being required to do so since 1999. Of those with a policy only about half said they thought it was working. Commenting on the findings the authors note that during their research heads told them that if you make a big thing out of bullying, parents will think you have a bullying problem in your school (Katz, Buchanan and Bream, 2001:Ch.5).Research commissioned by the charity Beatbullying, also in Britain, found a strong link between bullying and truancy. Reasons given by interviewees for truancy included ‘the need to go some where safe where no one could hurt me’, ‘fear of my life’ and ‘because I felt worthless and hated’. What is horribly ironic about the case studies that form part of the research is the contradiction between government

policy to try to force pupils into schools and what happens when they get there. The following are two examples:

1. Karen, for example, had to choose whether to go to school and face insults, kicks and punches or stay at home and risk her mother being sent to prison for failing to ensure her attendance. Karen did not go back to school in September after the summer holidays as she was too afraid. When her mother received a letter threatening court action she had to go back and was immediately bullied. The girls who bullied her were given detentions but Karen was now too frightened to go to school. Karen's mother was taken to court and given a warning and a parental tutor for a year. She was told that if Karen took another day off school she would be back in court facing more punishment.
2. Liam suffered persistent verbal and physical bullying so he truanted every day for two months. When his mother supported his actions she was accused of keeping her son from school and threatened with prosecution. Liam's school reacted initially by refusing to believe he was being bullied, despite having not previous history of truanting(Blindel 2006).

The failure of schools to protect young people from bullying also poses some difficult questions about whether schools as presently constituted can ever be truly inclusive for students with special educational needs who may be particularly vulnerable to bullying. An 'inclusive school' can only work if everybody is prepared to treat everybody else equally and fairly. After a lengthy article by a twelve year old autistic boy appeared in the British press describing how he had been bullied at school and self-excluded, the chief executive of the National Autistic Society commented the

following week that 60% of children at the more able end of the autistic spectrum are bullied at school:

'A report published by the National Autistic Society last month showed that, in many cases, bullying has led children with autism to self-harm or even to become suicidal – some as young as five and six years old' (*Education Guardian* 19/12/2006).

In Japan there is considerable concern about the large number of pupils who are taking their own lives because of bullying and two headteachers also committed suicide because they had failed to stop their pupils being bullied and committing suicide (Fitzgerald 2006; The Guardian 10/11/2006).

Teachers, too, can be guilty of bullying. Interviews carried out with 40 first year university students in Russia found that teachers called pupils a wide range of insulting words if they did not learn fast enough; used their classroom pointers as tools of punishment and intimidation; destroyed school, accessories if they did not comply with school regulations; threw various objects at pupils and physically attacked them by hitting their heads, pushing them or banging their heads against the blackboard (Zdravomyslova andGorshkova 2006).

Gender, Violence and Disaffection

As Duncan (2006) argues, a great deal of what passes as 'ordinary' bullying in British schools is actually underscored by a struggle for a desired sexual identity. Osler

(2006) further argues that whereas boys are more likely to be involved in physical bullying, among girls verbal or psychological bullying is more common. Her research found that schools tend to overlook verbal abuse, despite this being the most common form of bullying in schools and that this resulted in self-exclusion by girls when the necessary social, emotional and behavioural support was not forthcoming.

However, gender and sexuality are also significant factors in school refusal and drop out elsewhere. Various reasons have been given for the lower school attendance and higher school dropout by females in developing countries including cultural resistance to female education, the wider family responsibilities of female children and the tendency to invest scarce family resources in the education of boys rather than girls. However, the school itself can also be an important factor. The problem has been neatly summarised in a recent book,

'Sexual aggression by male teachers and boys is often dismissed as "just boys being boys". Girls are blamed for "asking for it". The implicit messages are that males should be tough, assertive, sexually predatory and ready for life in a rough-and-tumble world but females should be delicate, passive, sexually pure and sheltered. These behaviours and messages often make schools un-safe and uncomfortable for girls and are prominent among the reasons why, in many developing countries, adolescent girls are far less likely to attend than adolescent boys' (Leach and Mitchell,2006:x).

While gender violence in schools is not a problem restricted to sub-Saharan that region, as Leach and Mitchell note (pp26-28), studies have been carried out in at least

eight countries in that region which have revealed a consistent pattern of sexual abuse and harassment of girls by male students and teachers. Some teachers abused their authority to demand sexual favours from girls in exchange for good grades, preferential treatment in class or money. Such teachers are rarely expelled from the teaching profession, at most being transferred to another school. Similar sexual harassment of female students by tutors was found in a study of teacher education in Ghana (Teni-Atinga 2006).

A study of 300 school girls in Pakistan (Brohi and Ajaib 2006) found that sexual harassment (comments, lewd suggestions, inappropriate physical contact) was regularly experienced at secondary level from both pupils and teachers. As the study noted, while the girls were uncomfortable with their experiences, they were protective of their schools, offering excuses for the transgressions of others because they feared that their families might remove them from school if they knew more about what happened, a very real possibility according to the authors.

Sometimes the sexual harassment becomes even more serious. While estimates for how often a woman is raped in South Africa vary from every 26 seconds to every 90 seconds, a Medical Research Council survey carried out in South Africa in 1998 found that among rape victims who specified their relationship to the perpetrator 37.7% said their schoolteacher or principal had raped them (Human Rights Watch,2001:42).

Sexual harassment and abuse of pupils is not confined to developing countries. Harber (2004:98-99), for example, cites cases from Ireland, Britain, Japan, Canada and

Turkey. In March 2005 *The Observer* newspaper published an article on the sexual abuse of children at a school for the deaf in the 1960's and the paper claimed that it was aware of other allegations against deaf schools, both in the past and today (20/3/2005).

Homophobic bullying is also a serious problem in schools. A survey of 877 13-15 year olds and their teachers in Britain found that two thirds of the young people and three quarters of the teachers said they had seen homophobic bullying but only 13% of the pupils knew of rules or policies to prevent or punish it. While a quarter of the pupils had been homophobically bullied, only 20% had reported it to a teacher. The then schools minister, Stephen Twigg, launched an anti-bullying week when he discovered that only 6% of schools had policies and procedures to deal with homophobic bullying of pupils or teachers (Richardson 2004). Meyer (2006) provides evidence of widespread homophobic bullying in America and a lack of intervention from educationalists to stop it with the result that '…this teaches students that schools as institutions and their home communities, condone it' (p.44). She argues that American schools generally place higher value on strength, competitiveness aggressiveness and being tough – qualities widely seen as masculine. On the other hand, being creative, caring, good at school and quiet are often considered feminine qualities and are viewed by many as signs of weakness – particularly in boys, thereby leaving them open to homophobic bullying.

Other Exclusionary Practices

A form of violence institutionally sanctioned in many schools around the world is corporal punishment. The World Health Organisation reports that corporal punishment remains legal in at least 65 countries, despite the fact that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has underlined that corporal punishment is incompatible with the convention (WHO 2002). In other countries where it has been officially banned, such as South Africa, it is still widely used (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005), suggesting that corporal punishment in school still exists in at least one third and perhaps as much as half of the countries of the world. This rarely makes pupils feel enthusiastic about schooling. When Ross Epp asked her American higher education students about how they recalled feeling about physical punishment at school they reported feeling fear, humiliation, embarrassment and a sense of exclusion (1996:14-15). In Mexico, Martin (1994) reports that between a quarter and a fifth of the pupils he interviewed said that corporal punishment contributed to pupil drop out. In Nepal corporal punishment is an important reason for school drop out (Teeka-Bhattarai 2006) while in Botswana,

'The more obvious effects of corporal punishment included increased student anxiety, fear or resentment in class. Girls, in particular, remained silent, and were mistakenly dubbed as "lazy" or "shy" by some teachers, and so did some boys. Other boys absconded or refused to cooperate in female teachers' classes…Other studies have also found that excessive physical punishment, generally of boys, can prompt truancy' (Humphreys 2006).

There is also widespread international evidence from a range of countries that intensely competitive examination regimes lead to high levels of stress and anxiety

levels amongst schoolchildren. The resulting illnesses and absences are another form of state-sponsored school push-out, in some cultures permanent push-out as it is a significant contributory factor in suicides among young people (Harber 2004:Ch. 8). In Britain, for example, a survey by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found that a third of 11-16 year olds are in a state of constant anxiety with concerns about exams and homework at the top of the list of children's worries. The report stated that 'In every classroom there are likely to be up to four children who hate leaving the house in the morning because of problems at school' (Slater 2004).Others get through the day using anti-depressant drugs like Prozac and Seroxat. In 1995 46,000 such drugs were prescribed to 16-18 year olds but by 2003 this had risen to 140,000. David Cotterill, Professor of Child and Mental Health at Leeds University argued that that there was a connection between this and the increased examination pressure in the education system (Townsend 2004).

Osler (2006) makes a further connection between examinations and exclusion in England arguing that with schools under pressure to demonstrate improved performance in attainment tests and examinations, the numbers of disciplinary exclusions from schools (most commonly of boys) started to increase steadily from 2001. However, if girls were unhappy at school or faced difficulties they were more likely to withdraw from learning or not attend rather than disrupt the learning of others and so could be ignored '…particularly if the girls concerned drop out of school altogether and are not counted in the school's examination performance' (p.575).

One further form of exclusion concerns prejudice or racism against a particular group. Violence against lower caste people or Dalits in India, for example, is widespread (Human Rights Watch 1999). Schooling, however, not only exacerbates prejudice against lower caste people, it also acts in a directly violent way towards them. A national report in 2002 found that many lower caste children are regularly beaten at school by teachers who regard them as polluting the class. The caste definition of 'untouchable' was abolished in 1950 but the country's 200 million Dalits – now referred to as "scheduled castes" or "scheduled tribes" still routinely suffer discrimination. The India Education Report compiled by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration noted that lower caste pupils were verbally and physically abused. Teachers in schools often refused to touch them and made them targets of their anger and abuse. They were punished at the slightest pretext and often humiliated. They were made to sit and eat separately. Their exercise books or writing slates were not touched by the higher caste teachers. They were made to sit on their own mats outside the classroom or at the door. In many cases they are beaten up by children from the higher castes. Many lower caste children are not allowed to walk through the village on their way to school and are denied their right to free textbooks, uniforms and a midday meal. In rural Karnataka children from the lower castes are referred to as "kadu-jana" (forest people) by teachers who claim that they would not learn anything unless they were given a severe beating (Behal 2002). Recently Padma Yedla, head of Save the Children's education programme in Orissa and Andra Pradesh, said there remained ingrained prejudices against lower caste children in Indian state schools,

‘Instead of finding out why a child hasn’t completed their homework, or recognising that they cannot get help from an illiterate parent, the teachers resort to verbal abuse and humiliation. It’s a vicious circle that only gets a bad response from the child’ (Bancroft 2006).

A Fundamental Problem with Schools?

So, what is it about the nature of schooling that not only cannot protect young people from violence and danger but actively perpetrates it? In terms of schooling, the overwhelming evidence is that the dominant or hegemonic model globally, with some exceptions, is authoritarian rather than democratic (Harber,2004:Ch.2). Education for and in democracy, human rights and critical awareness is not a primary characteristic of the majority of schooling. While the degree of harshness and despotism within authoritarian schools varies from context to context and from institution to institution, in the majority of schools power over what is taught and learned, how it is taught and learned, where it is taught and learned, when it is taught and learned and what the general learning environment is like is not in the hands of pupils. It is predominantly government officials, headteachers and teachers who decide, not learners. Most schools are essentially authoritarian institutions, however benevolent or benign that authoritarianism is and whatever beneficial aspects of learning are imparted.

Why are the key international formal institutions of learning socially constructed in this way? Historically, two of the main original purposes of mass formal schooling was control and compliance and these purposes are both deeply embedded in the nature of contemporary schooling and are highly impervious to change. Green’s study of the origins of formal schooling systems in England, France, the United States and Prussia in the nineteenth century argues that a key purpose of their construction,

'…to generalise new habits of routine and rational calculation, to encourage patriotic values, to inculcate moral disciplines and, above all, to indoctrinate in the political and economic creeds of the dominant classes. It helped construct the very subjectivities of citizenship, justifying the ways of the state to the people and the duties of the people to the state. It sought to create each person as a universal subject but it did so differentially according to class and gender. It formed the responsible citizen, the diligent worker, the willing tax payer, the reliable juror, the conscientious parent, the dutiful wife, the patriotic soldier and the dependable or deferential voter' (1990:80).

Schooling thus provided a means of social and political control, in particular to counter the threat to the state of increasingly industrialised, urbanised and potentially organised working populations. As Green's study argues, 'The task of public schooling was not so much to develop new skills for the industrial sector as to inculcate habits of conformity, discipline and morality that would counter the widespread problems of social disorder' (1990:59). Schooling would be organised to prepare future workers with the subordinate values and behaviours necessary for the modern bureaucratic, mass production workplace and the existing social order – regularity, routine, monotonous work and strict discipline. Its organisational form would therefore need to be authoritarian in order to inculcate habits of obedience and conformity. This authoritarian model of schooling with its origins in state formation, modernisation and social and political control gradually extended globally from European societies and Japan through colonisation where the key purpose of

schooling was to help to control indigenous populations for the benefit of the colonial power.

Although physical appearances might sometimes suggest otherwise, in terms of power and control the majority of schools have basically remained much the same since their inception and gradually global spread from the end of the nineteenth century. In this authoritarian situation of relative powerlessness and neglect of their human rights pupils can be mistreated violently or be influenced by potentially violent beliefs because the dominant norms and behaviours of the wider society are shared, or at least tolerated, and not challenged, by many adults in the formal education system. In this situation disaffection and resulting behaviours can become a rational and logical reaction.

Conclusion

While many pupils are happy at school, disaffection and non-attendance are also not at all uncommon. This paper has argued that one significant reason for this is the experience of schooling, which for many pupils can be distinctly negative and even dangerous. School is very far from automatically being a good thing either for individuals or societies and governments internationally would do well to examine what it is about the nature and practices of schooling that alienates so many pupils. While in the longer term the need is to move schools towards meeting the requirements of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (greater democracy, more transparency, greater flexibility) in the short term there is still considerable effort required simply to stop schools and educational systems doing harm.

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